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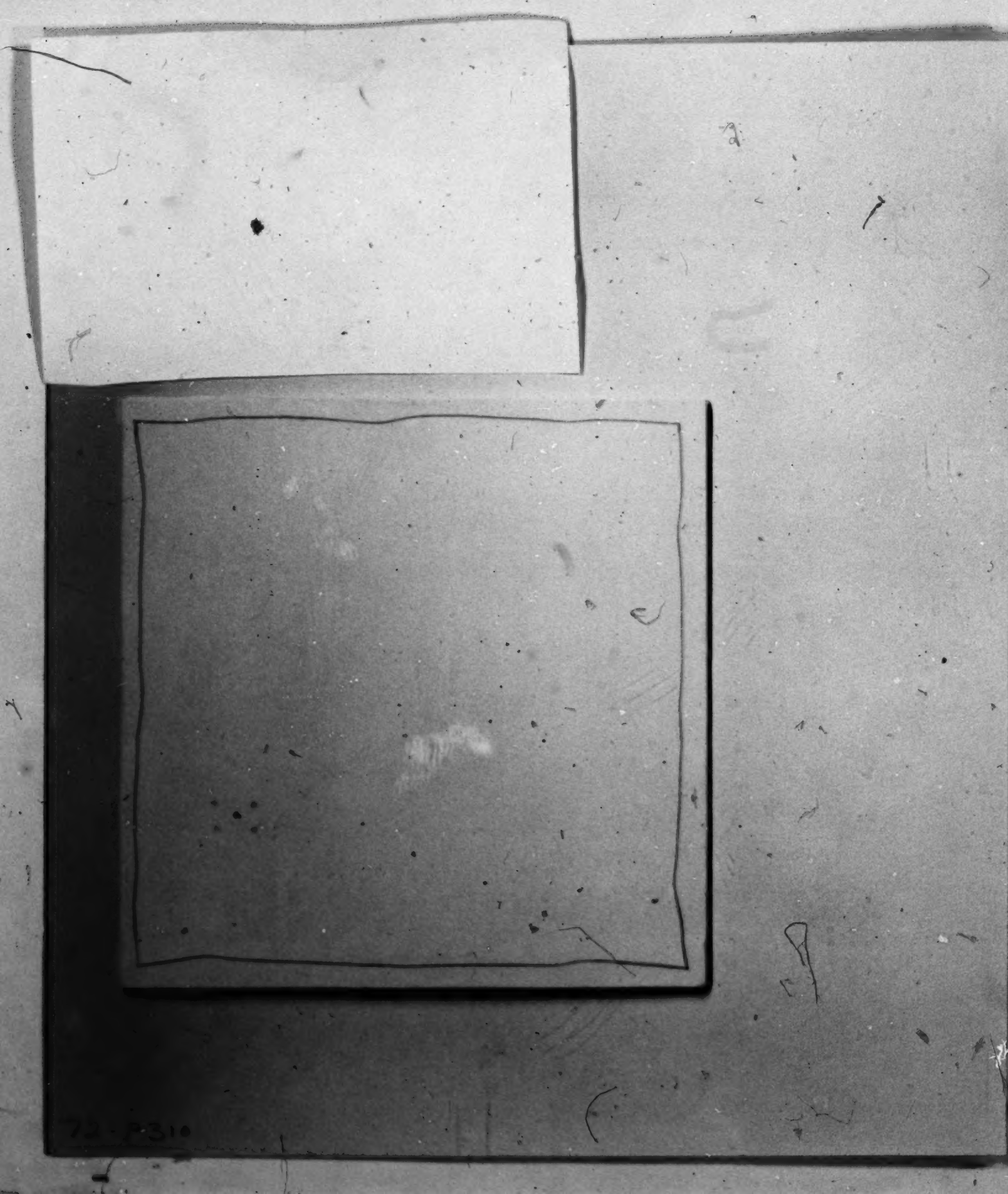
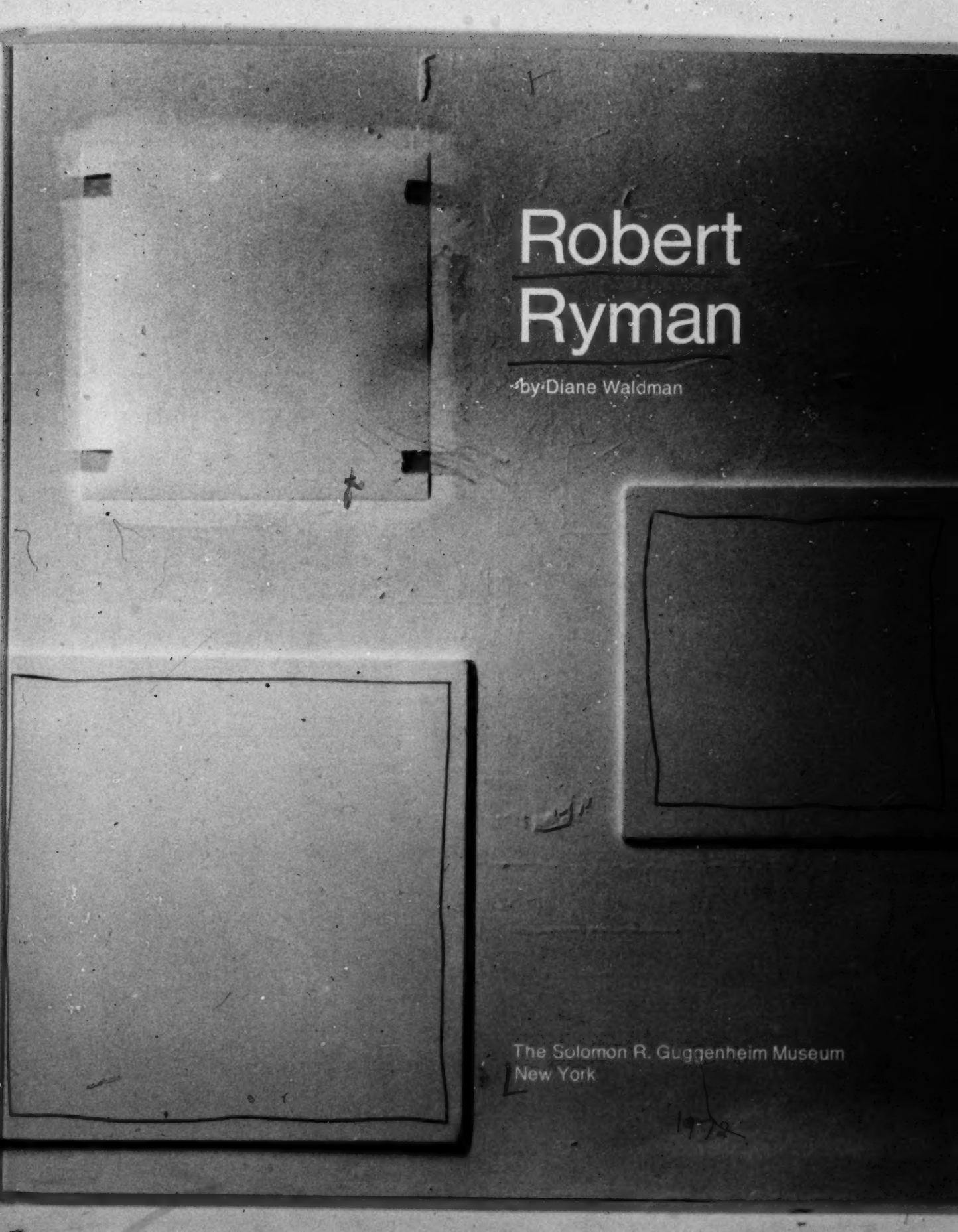
Robert Ryman

Robert Ryman





Robert Ryman

by Diane Waldman

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
New York

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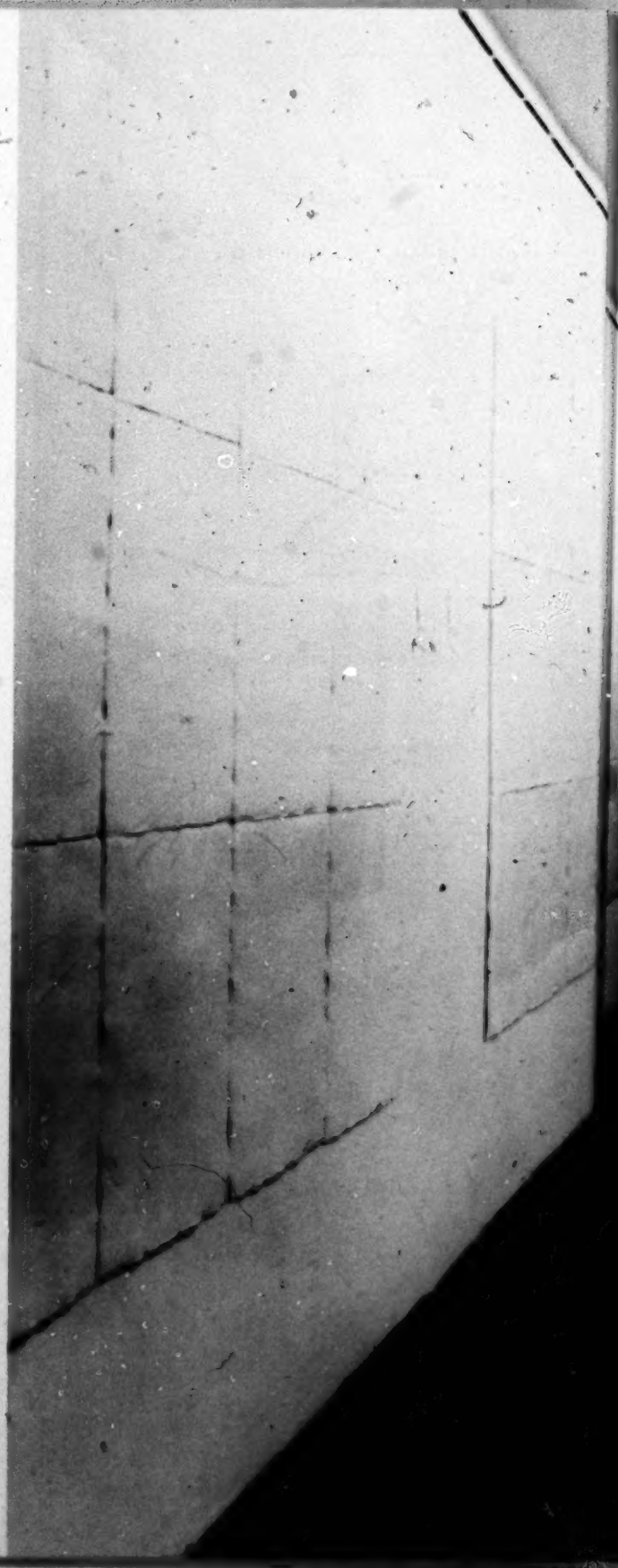

Installation view, Galerie Konrad Fischer, Dusseldorf
December 1968

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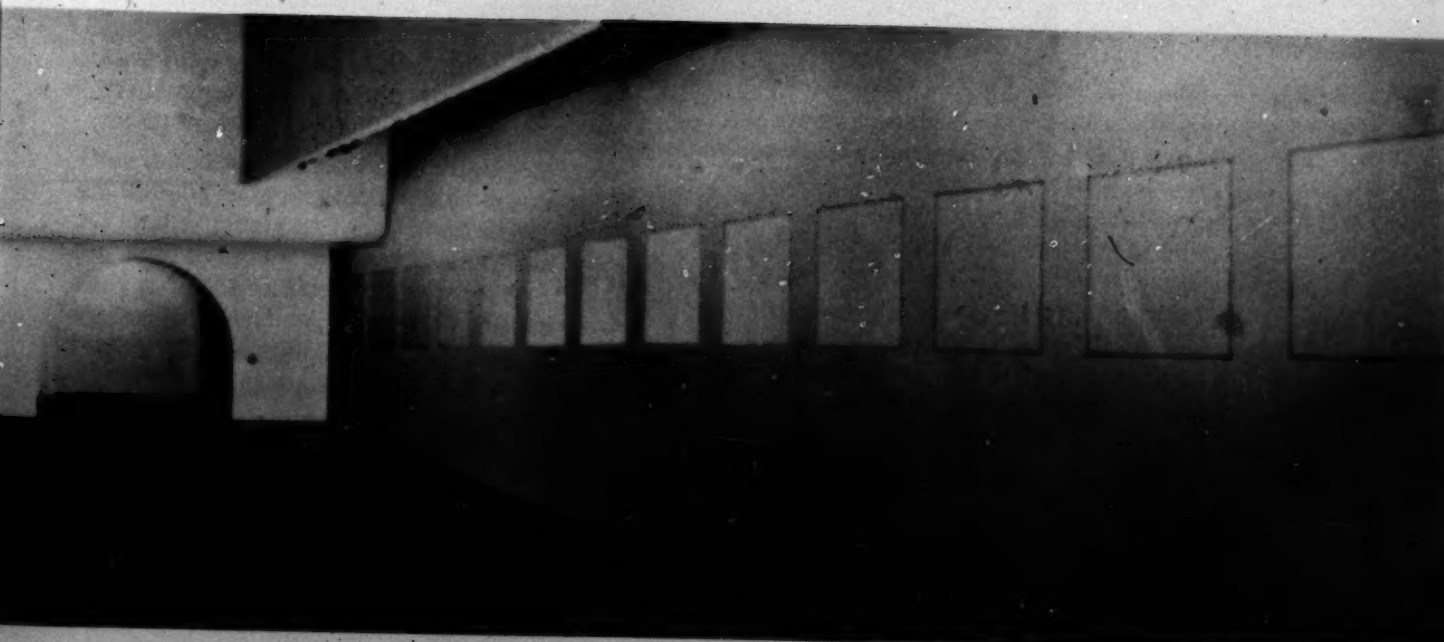
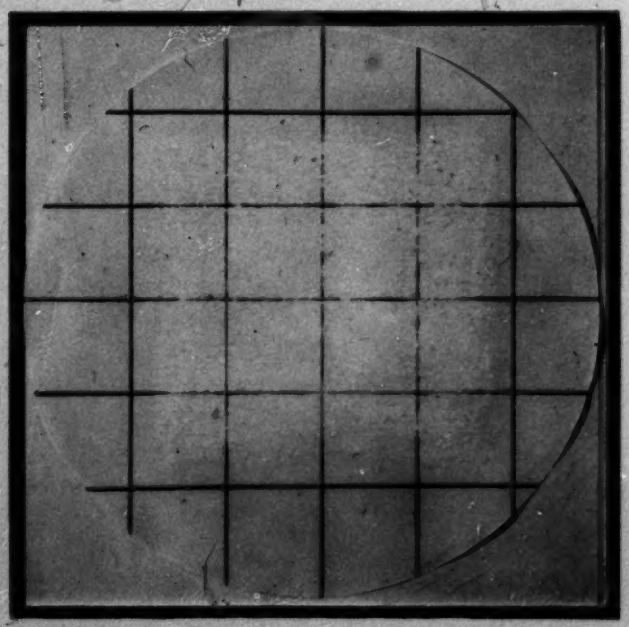
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Among the many individuals who have helped in the preparation of this exhibition, I must express my appreciation, first of all, to the artist Robert Ryman whose cooperation has proved invaluable. In addition, the staffs of the Fischbach and John Weber galleries have been extremely helpful in providing the necessary documentation on the artist. I would also like to thank Linda Shearer, Sabine Rewald, Carol Fuerstein, Ward Jackson, and Beverly Liftman, of the Museum's staff, for their assistance in the various stages of planning the exhibition and catalogue. Finally, a word of thanks to the lenders who have made this exhibition possible.

D.W.





Five. 1984 (the second of five drawings)
Charcoal and pastel
12½" diameter
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Donald Karshan, Paris, New York

INTRODUCTION

Minimal Art, which first came to public attention in 1965, constituted a point by point rejection of the more blatant excesses of Abstract Expressionism. Like the Pop artists before them, the Minimalists preferred a static, symmetrical, fixed system to the random, accidental, intuitive approach of the fifties. The response of both the Minimalists and the Pop artists to Abstract Expressionism was one of abrupt change. The fact remains, however, that the Minimalists succeeded in defining the new order where Pop Art – but for Lichtenstein and Warhol – did not. As I have mentioned elsewhere, the Minimalists opted for

> *interchangeable, mass-produced units, not the conventional methods of hand-made production; for non-relational repetitive forms; for a tough, impassive, anonymity in contrast to the* angst *and facture of the fifties; above all, for an art with no ties to representation.*[1]

They introduced the concept of environmental art, thereby reducing the limitations imposed by the studio/gallery and they freed artists from the need to regard their work in terms of the early sixties' obsession with style. The Minimalists' position, however, is perhaps most closely aligned with Reinhardt's statement:

> *The forms of art are always preformed and premeditated. The creative process is always an academic routine and sacred procedure. Everything is prescribed and proscribed. Only in this way is there no grasping or clinging to anything. Only a standard form can be imageless, only a stereotyped image can be formless, only a formularized art can be formulaless.*[2]

They brought to sculpture some of the most far-reaching and radical changes since David Smith. In painting, Minimalism has been less significant, producing few artists of note, with the exception of Robert Ryman and Robert Mangold.

As a group, the Minimalists were influenced to a considerable degree, esthetically and idealogically, by Constructivism, probably as a reaction to Abstract Expressionism and its Cubist roots. Malevitch's *White on White* series of 1918, featuring both white and the square, were especially significant for Ryman's work of the mid-sixties. Ryman's nearly exclusive and obsessive concentration on the use of white focuses on the condition of light rather than color per se, and allows the physicality of paint to make its presence known. Both Malevitch's *White on White* series and Barnet Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, 1958-66, which were not exclusively but primarily white, aspire to an order outside the realm of pure painting. These extra-art associations,

1. author's quote, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Guggenheim International Exhibition 1971*, New York, 1971, p. 16.

2. Ad Reinhardt, quoted in *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects*, The New York Cultural Center, New York, 1970, p. 46.

concerned as they are with the mystical (Malevitch) or the spiritual (Newman), have little to do with the pragmatic art of Ryman, and with the painting and sculpture of the sixties in general. Compositionally, the work of both masters, of an admittedly reduced but still hierarchical order, differs from Ryman who has largely abandoned a figure/ground relationship for the non-relational, repetitive organization that the Minimalists proclaimed a vital part of their program.

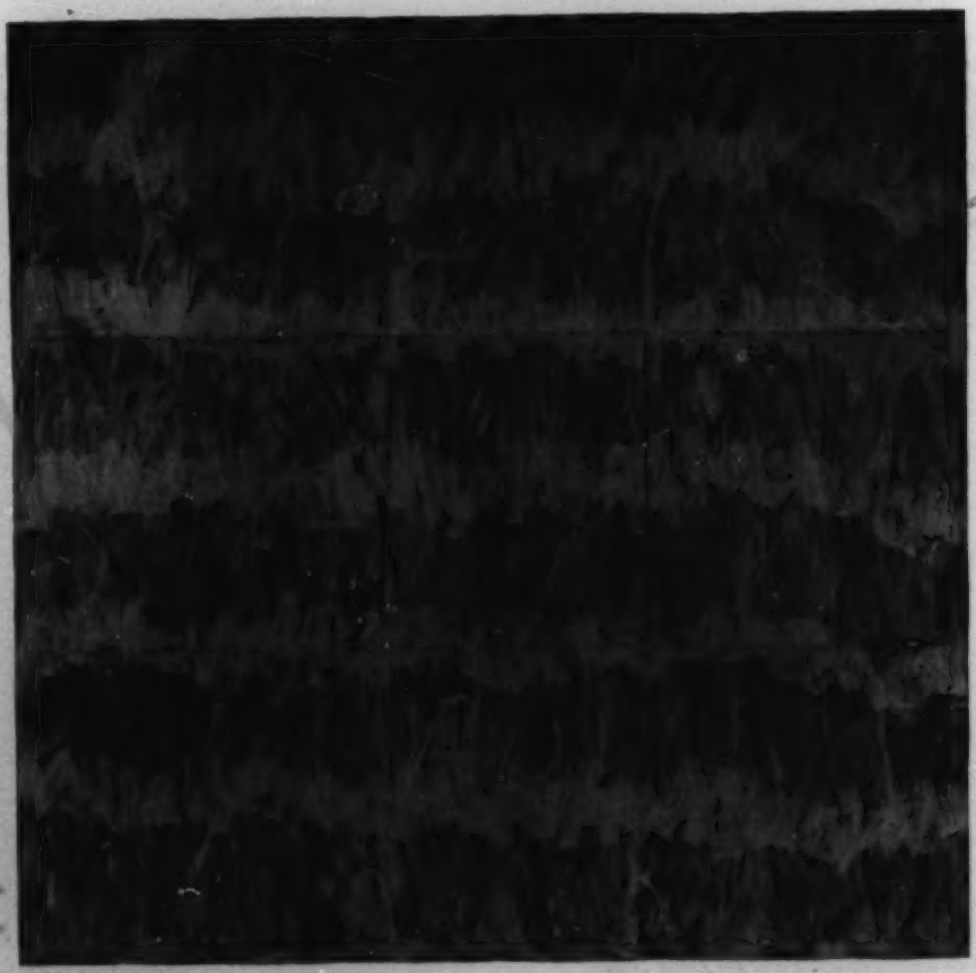
In denying the form/ground relationship and stressing the materialism of paint as his subject, Ryman could identify form and ground as one. Fusing the physical with the ideational has precedents, especially in the work of Jackson Pollock, and more generally in the Abstract Expressionist emphasis of the materiality of paint. Process notwithstanding, Ryman differs from them in several significant respects: by substituting area for arena, it no longer becomes necessary to document the activity of painting or to engage in the residual implications of spatial depth and atmosphere that is characteristic of Pollock, Rothko and Newman. Nor is it necessary to rely on accident, inflection or surface incident to carry the field. Instead, Ryman has been eminently successful in the sublimation of the imagistic by recreating the blank canvas with a series of impersonal brushstrokes.

Although Malevitch was an early forerunner of monochromatic painting, he was by no means alone in this endeavor. More recent precedents exist in the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt, the blue and gold paintings of Yves Klein and the color panels of Ellsworth Kelly, to cite a few of the more prominent examples. In most instances, unlike Ryman, these artists were involved with exploring color or value relations. Among the artists whose work is not primarily identified with monocromatic painting, was Frank Stella whose black paintings of 1958-59 were highly influential for the Minimalists. A more problematic, because less clearly influential, antecedent occurs in the *White Paintings* that Robert Rauschenberg produced in 1951. Rauschenberg's paintings may have constituted a response to Albers, with whom he studied at Black Mountain, but in view of his subsequent work they seem more likely to be a Dada gesture – about absence or emptiness – as signaled by the lack of color. Ryman's paintings, on the other hand, are not about nothingness but about an emphatic, if understated, presence.

Although Ryman is aligned with the Minimalist movement, he has more recently been claimed for both Process and Conceptual Art. These shifting classifications, if somewhat arbitrary, do nonetheless point out the fact that he eludes categorization. Since his is still a painterly response, the consequence of facing pictorial decisions, the results are of necessity fundamentally different from what we have seen in the sixties: a period characterized by the erosion of the position held by the "specific object", its dematerialization in the face of such external factors as the environment, and its subsequent banishment in favor of the "idea as idea". He is, nonetheless, part of a particular generation that matured after Abstract Expressionism and his reactions are, predictably, partially determined by these factors.

In Ryman's mature work, which dates from 1965, the majority of his decisions are already apparent, if not yet fully developed. A prominent

Untitled. 1965
Oil on cotton
10 x 10"



Untitled. 1969
Enamelac on cardboard
Each panel 60 x 60"
Originally shown Whitney Museum of American Art 1969
Subsequently divided into sections

feature is his choice of the square as the neutral vehicle: it was the only undistorted, non-evocative shape that would permit the surface to read as physical substance. Although Malevitch used the square to advantage, we tend to identify it with the more recent work of Josef Albers. However, his series, *Homage to the Square*, although simplified in structure, was concerned with color relationships to an extent that no longer seemed viable to Ryman. In fact, Albers' nesting tiers of color generally proved of little interest to the Minimalists, with the notable exception of Don Judd who used it to great effect in his sculpture. Albers' *Color Interaction*, like Arp's *Space Pictures*, must be seen as the extension of illusionism, albeit by abstract rather than figurative means. In terms of abstraction, this aspect of illusionism has gradually diminished in the later twentieth century, with Pollock's skeins and Stella's interlace, to cite but two examples, bringing the picture plane into increasing prominence. The suggestion of illusionism possesses little vitality for Ryman, who paints a surface entirely without depth – or only that depth which is literal, caused by the application of paint.

For Ryman, color presented a set of conditions that he found inappropriate to the phenomena of the picture plane. Because of the shifting identity of color – each color having properties that are specific to itself – other devices have to be invented to hold the plane. In the sixties, one solution was the shaped canvas, the creation of an object that held the wall and simultaneously forced an equivalent relationship between opposing color forces. Other solutions included the emphasis on the vertical or horizontal attenuation of the field, the literal separation of colors, their implicit containment by means of white or black interstices, or spraying or scumbling to create textural effects. Many of these solutions proved detrimental to the use of color. The other possibility – of succumbing to the retinal aspects of color by toying with optical phenomena – has proved largely *retardataire*. Too, given the predilection for color relationships to establish spatial situations, it is not surprising that Ryman chose to eliminate color altogether, concentrating instead on white which has a neutrality that is unrivalled save for that of the square.

Ryman's earlier paintings and collages of the fifties (illus.) indicated a preference for a Cubist scaffolding, in which overlapping shapes were offset by luscious blues and pinks. Even in 1963, such works as *Stretched Drawing* (illus.), still reflected the Cubist/Constructivist esthetic that shaped Ryman's early work. The Cubist grid obtained in still another work, *Five*, 1964 (illus.) that utilized a circular format that Ryman has returned to in his recent series of lithographs (illus.). The faintly suggested brushed square superimposed on the black grid, while undeniably attractive, is certainly reactionary, and Ryman evidently recognized this. Shortly thereafter, in 1965, in such works as *Untitled*, 1965, (illus.) and, more important, the *Windsor* series, Ryman layered horizontal slabs of paint on his canvas, in using the uneven brushstrokes as both marks and texture. While Jasper Johns elevated the brushstroke to prominence in the late fifties, he did so as an ironic commentary, mocking the excessive gesture of fifties Action Painting. In addition, Johns manipulated pigment in a way that has become identified with such tangible objects as the American flag or the

map of the United States. Since Ryman prefers to identify the properties of painting per se, the associative value of objects was a detrimental, rather than vital factor. Ryman's fundamental philosophy is not unlike that of Malevitch who said:

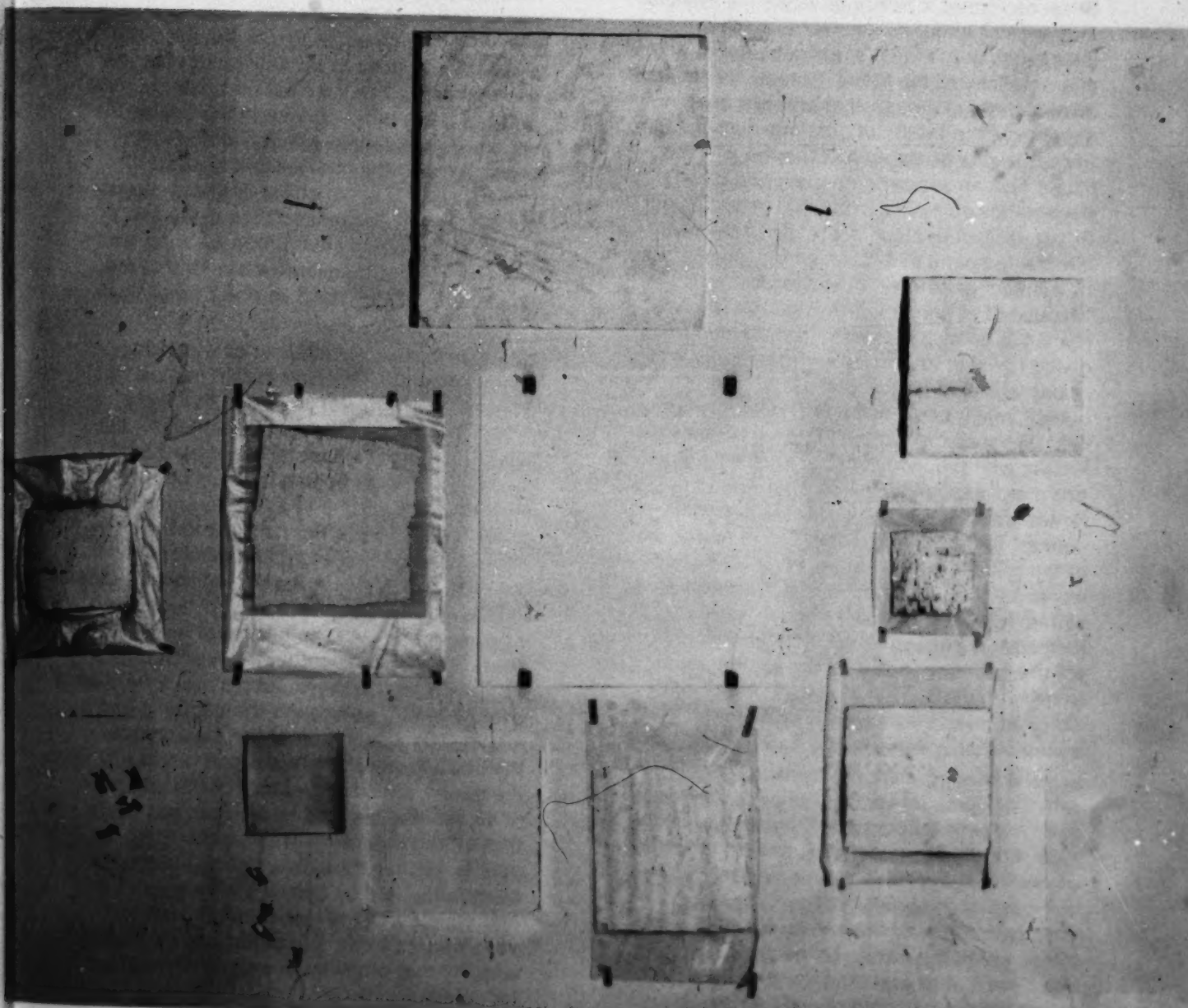
> *the nearer one gets to the phenomenon of painting, the more the sources lose their system and are broken, setting up another order according to the laws of painting.*[3]

The emphasis on the object, which Johns and Rauschenberg predicted in the mid-fifties, and which found differing interpretations in the early sixties, in both Pop Art and Minimal sculpture, also produced the unusual and short-lived shaped canvas. Rauschenberg's collaged combines, Johns' mutable American flags, and Stella's eccentric object-like paintings, played an important, if subsequently tangential, role in the early sixties. For Ryman, shape was damaging to his painting; consequently, he began to work in the opposite direction of many of his contemporaries. With the *Standard* series of 1966-67, he made one of his most drastic statements to date, using cold rolled steel as his "canvas". The characteristically thin steel, to which enamel paint was applied in broad brushstrokes, became the basis for a series of paintings, each a four-foot square module, and raised his conviction about paint to a new level. The progressive thinning of his support, evident from a comparison of the *Stretched Drawing* of 1963 with the *Standards*, and the successive reliance upon the application of pigment in as impersonal a manner as possible, made it feasible for Ryman to reject everything that was unessential to his painting and to elevate white to a new purity.

Prior to the *Standards*, Ryman produced two canvases, *Twin* and *Allied* (illus.), in which he continued to exploit the possibilities of the brushstroke on a canvas support. In these two paintings, the brushstrokes are readily apparent, but less significant in terms of thickness or width than in the *Standard* series. Concurrent with the relative flatness of the stroke, Ryman allowed, in *Allied*, the edges of the canvas ground to remain unpainted, as if to reiterate this support. Since this effect has appeared infrequently in subsequent paintings, one must assume that Ryman found this solution unsatisfying, signifying as it does, a carryover from the Abstract Expressionist practice of fudging the edge, in itself a muted reflection of Cézanne's proto-Cubist *passage*. This method of identifying pigment with plane is one that Ryman established more successfully in the *Standards*, by allowing the brushstrokes to reveal the underlying steel support. In 1966, Ryman completed another series, *Delta*, in which he continued to use oil on canvas, but on a relatively large scale. After the Delta paintings, Ryman abandoned the stretcher support, using first cold rolled steel, in the *Standards*, then stapling sheets of paper to the wall, or using masking tape, in an effort to suppress dimension as an essential factor of the paintings. In the more recent enamel on paintings of 1970, however, Ryman has shown an inclination to return, if only temporarily, to a canvas support but only to reinforce a surface that is far more opaque, hence light-reflecting, than his previous mat brushstrokes.

3. Lucy R. Lippard, "*The Silent Art*," *Art in America*, vol. 55, no. 1, January–February 1967, p. 58-63.

Studio Wall. 1970



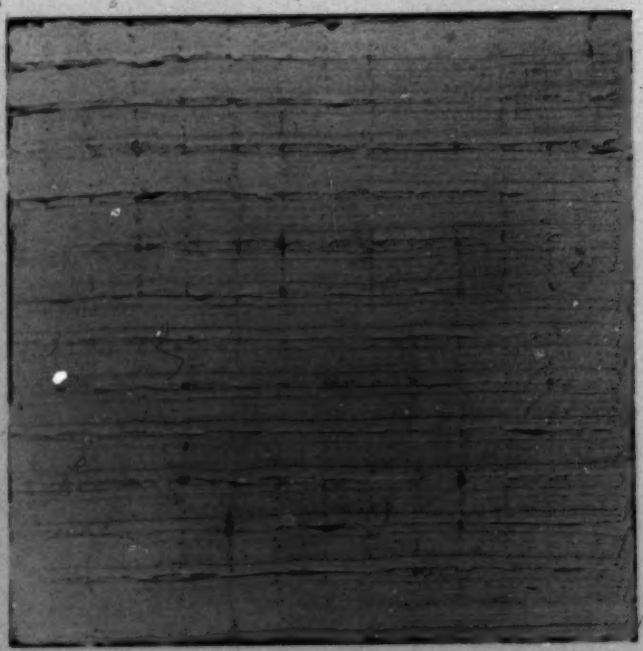
Because Ryman's paintings stress the physical, they are not about space. Gone are the intimations of the void, of atmosphere, of arena characteristic of the fifties. Instead, we witness images that are airless, that propose area, dimension, the reality of painting-cum-painting. In such works on paper as *Classico IV*, 1968, (illus.), Ryman seems to be exploring other possibilities by testing a number of media. Paper, tacked or stapled directly to the wall, infers a temporal situation; indeed, many works of this kind have been destroyed or damaged. The use of paper as a finite unit has allowed Ryman to eliminate pigment, simultaneously giving him a ready-made form (i.e. each sheet of paper) which he can align to create an overall image of six units. In this work, and the *Classico* series in particular, there is a certain affinity with the modular structure of Minimal sculpture, especially that of Carl Andre. Nonetheless, these works contain a faintly defined yet specific square nestled in the midst of the grid structure that recalls such earlier works as *Five*, 1964. In most of the *Classico* series, however, Ryman seems to have deliberately chosen to paint his interior square off-center, not obtrusively so, but just enough to retain the preeminence of the paper squares. This has, of course, made his interior configuration subject to the exterior shape.

In yet another departure, Ryman produced a series of works on corrugated paper, which in some ways resembled the *Standard* series of 1966. Nonetheless, the work, executed in 1969, consisted of a relatively variegated surface, the result of the brush dragged over the irregular surface of the cardboard. The entire effect, given the nature of the paper support, was more ephemeral than the rigidity the early rolled steel could provide. In the recent paintings, he retained the interior configuration of the separate units of paper of the preceding *Classico* series, but used the overall brushstroke to partially obliterate the paper squares. For the most part, the dragged brush became more opaque in the center of each unit, creating in effect two horizontal tracks through the mid-section of each cardboard. The serial effect of this group was perhaps more pronounced than in Ryman's previous paintings, each unit appearing almost identical (given the minute variations of the hand) and defining itself as one overall work.

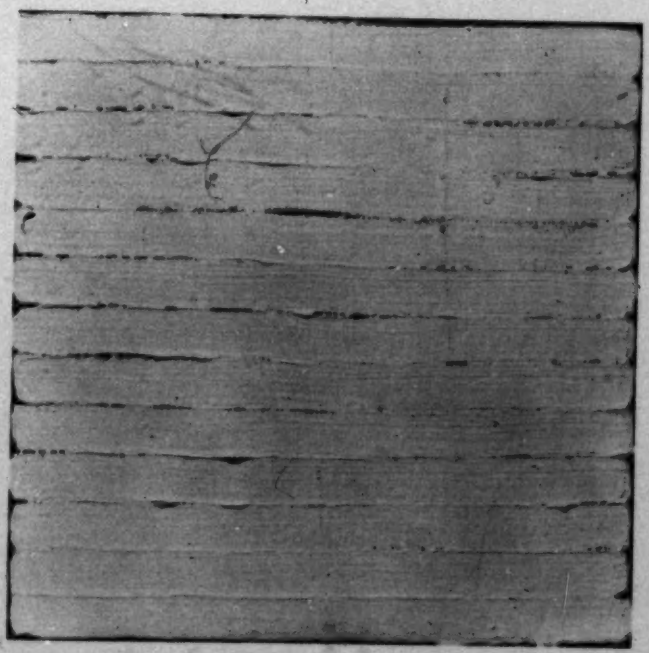
In the enamelac *General* series of 1970, Ryman described squares within frames. They were a group of paintings that were varied in size but in which, nonetheless, the interior remained consistent with the frame. A similar variation occurs in a number of drawings of the same year in which the interior frame forms an irregular contrast to the symmetrical edge. Among the most recent work are a group in progress, entitled *Surface Veil*, (illus.), which Ryman has envisioned as still another series. The largest of his works to date, each of the four (three are at this writing completed) is a twelve-foot square, a field large enough to extend beyond the painter's arm's length. The application of the brushstroke, the limits to which the artist can physically take the stroke, become the limits of the image. In so defining his process, Ryman has made explicit the extension of the real into the infinite. He has done this, not by allusion or association, but by testing the very extensive opportunities of the means of art. He has produced an extremely fertile and productive imagery that offers innumerable possibilities for painting.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

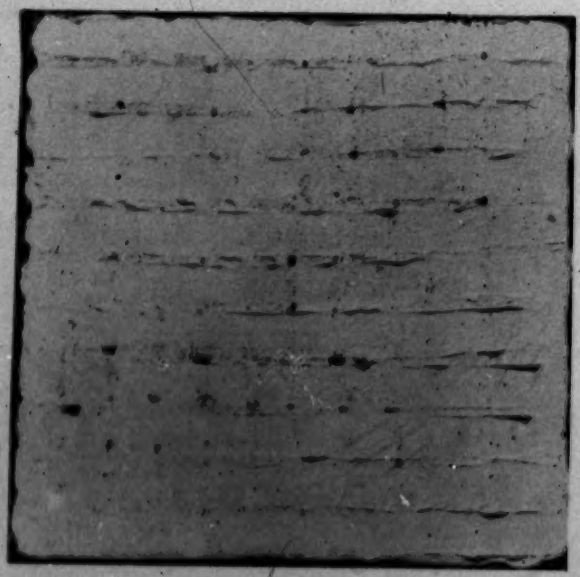
1 *Untitled*. 1965



2 *Untitled*. 1965



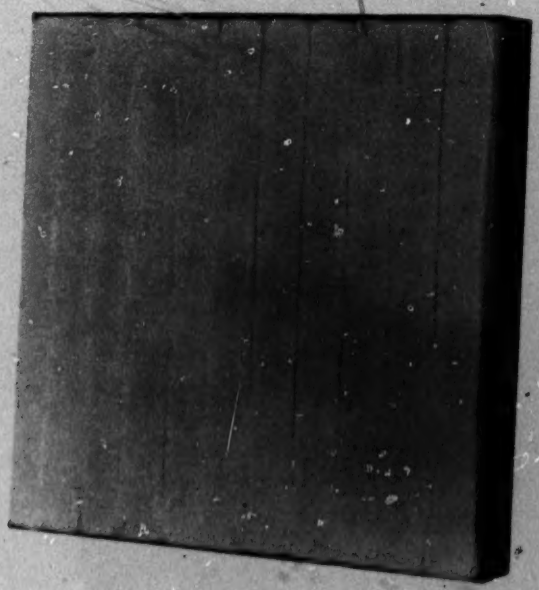
3 *Untitled*. 1965



4 *Untitled*. 1965

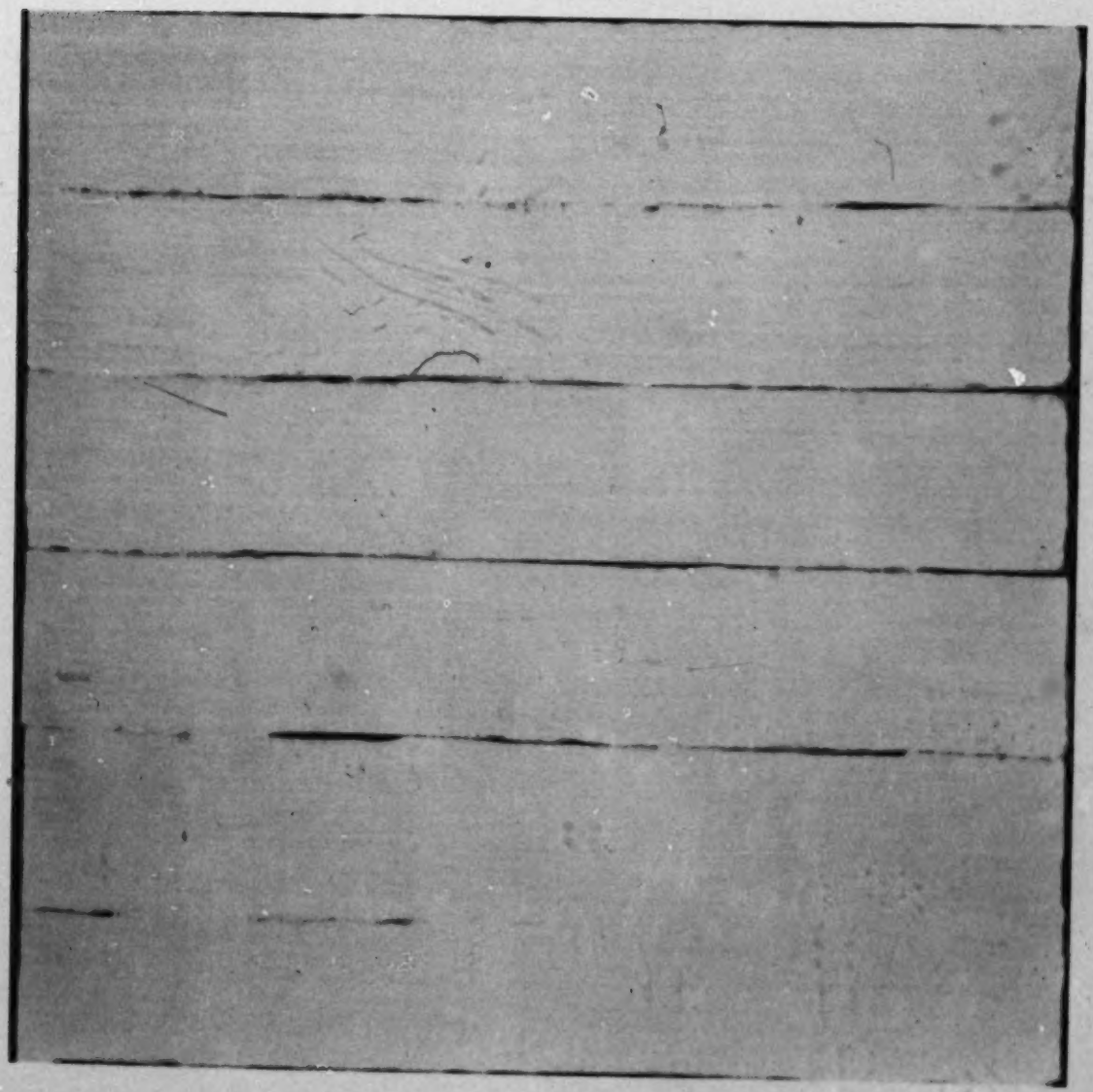
5 *Untitled.* 1965

7 Untitled, 1966

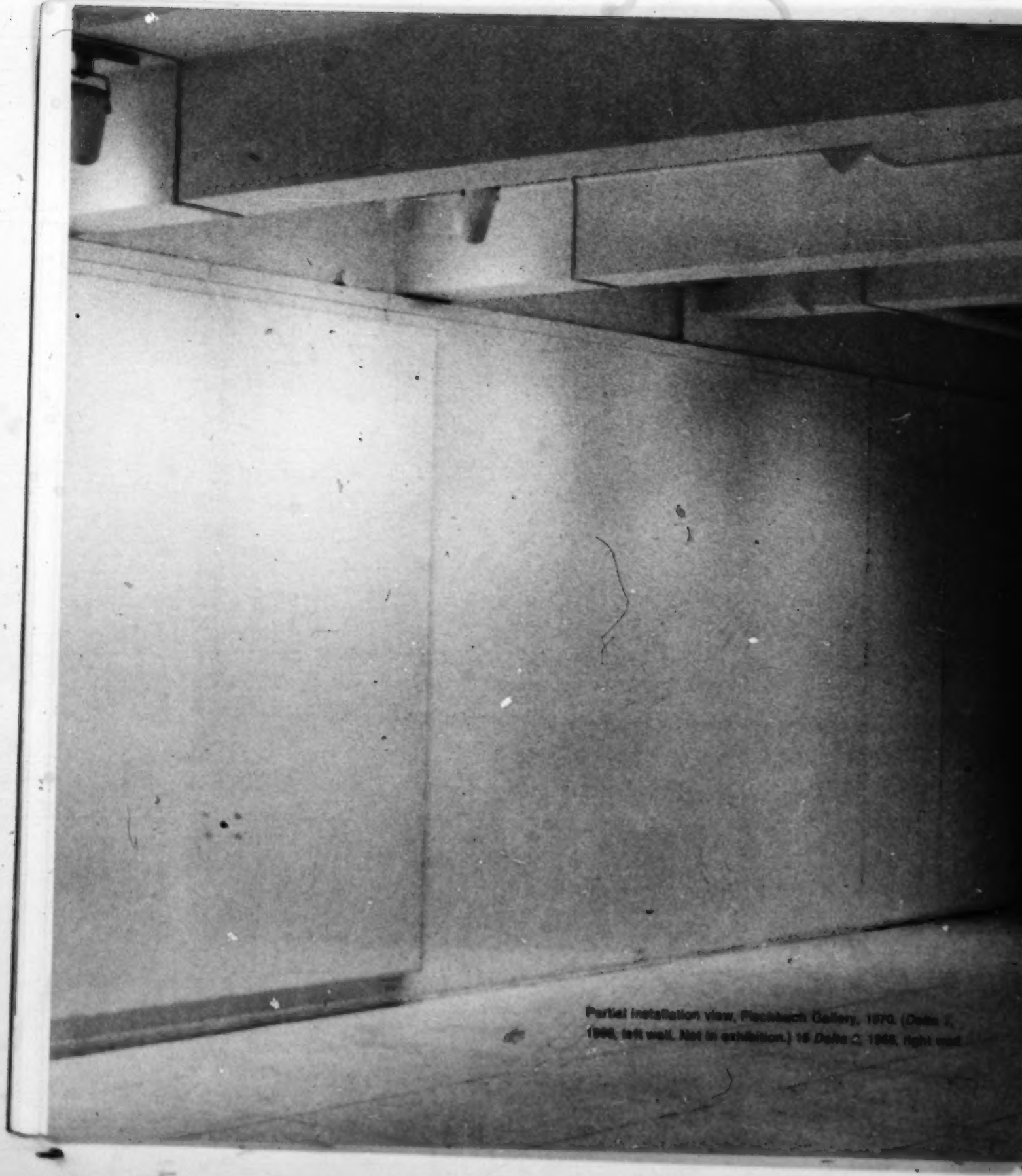


8 *Untitled*. 1965

13 *Windsor 6.* 1985–66



14 *Mayco*. 1966



Partial installation view, Fischbach Gallery, 1970. (*Delta 1*, 1966, left wall. Not in exhibition.) 16 *Delta C*, 1968, right wall.

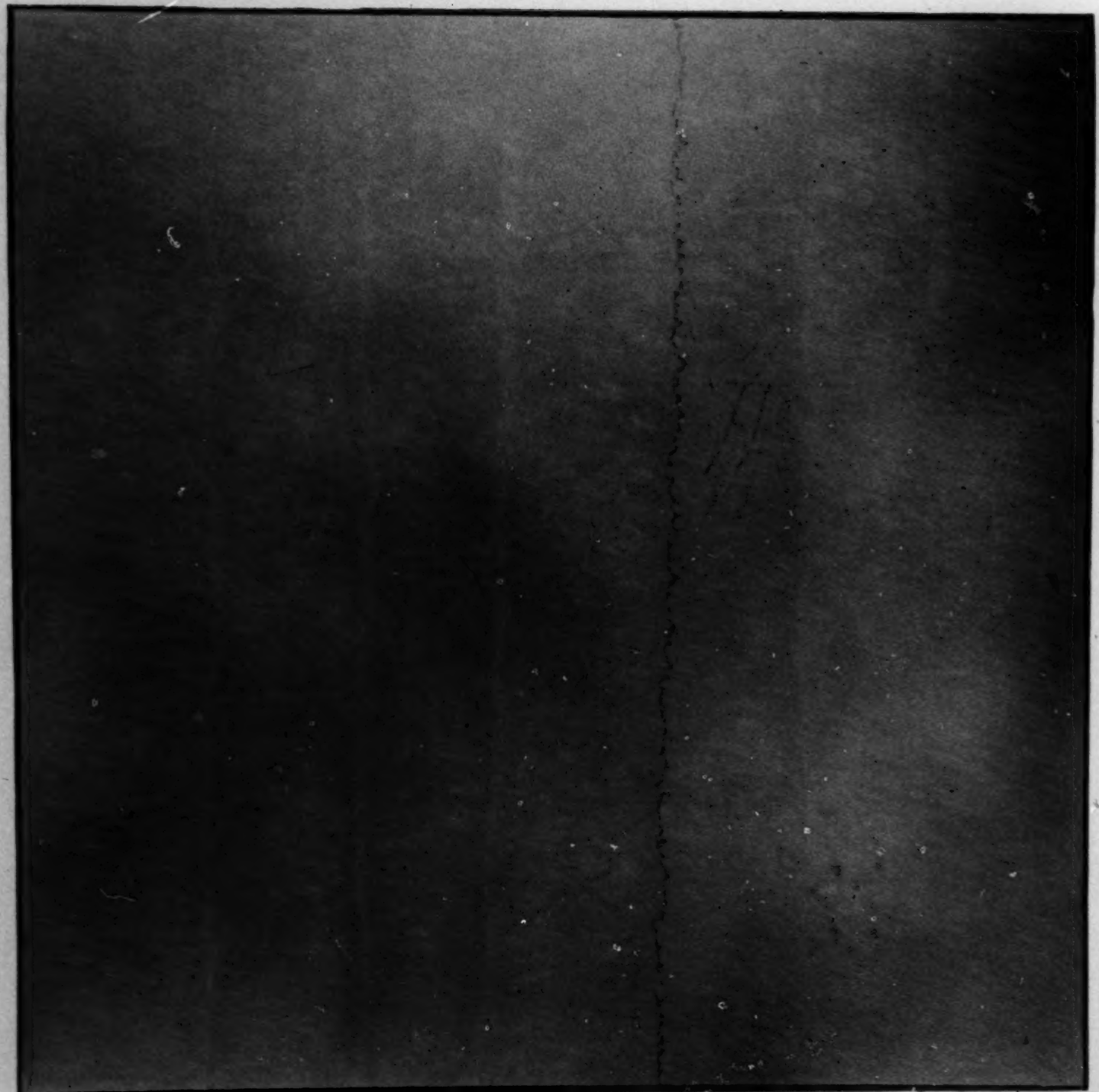
Detail of 16 *Twin*. 1966

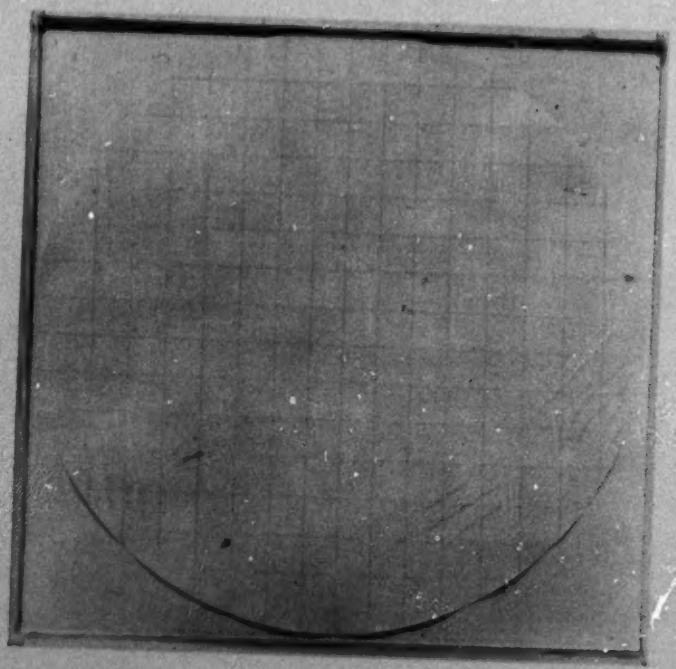
19 *Surface Veil I.* 1970

21 *Surface Veil.* 1970-71

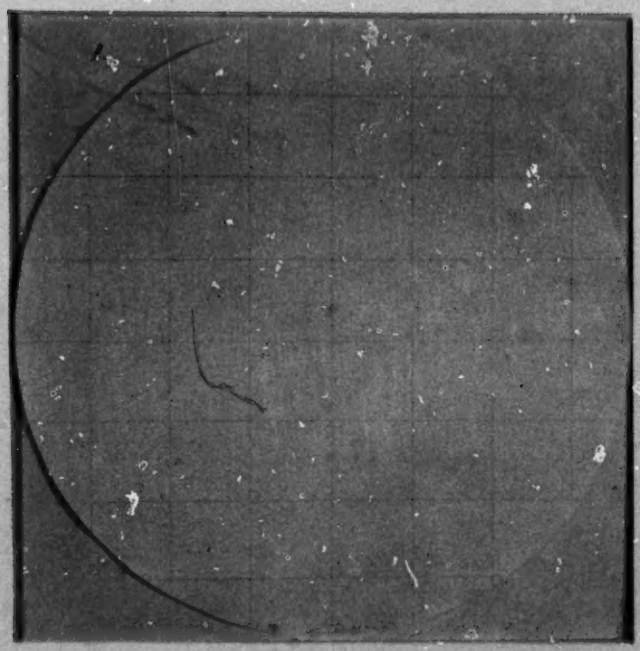
22 *Surface Veil.* 1970–71

25 *Surface Veil III.* 1971

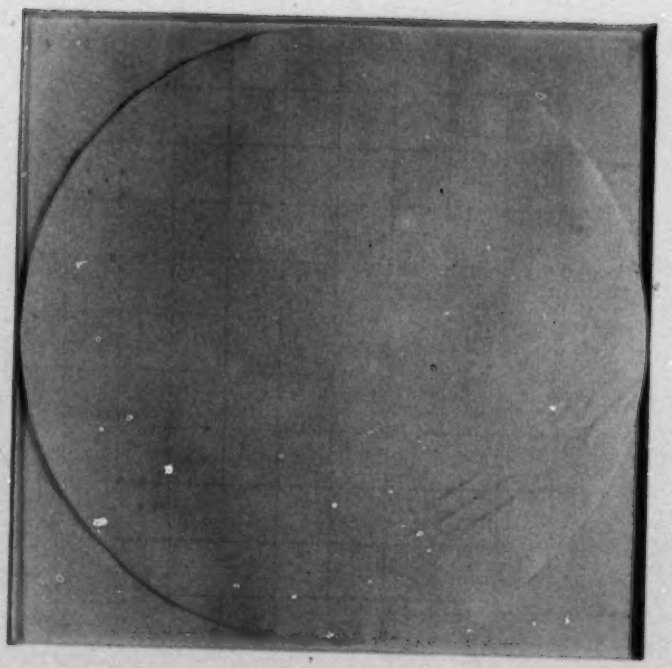




27 Eagle Turquoise 7H-84, 1966

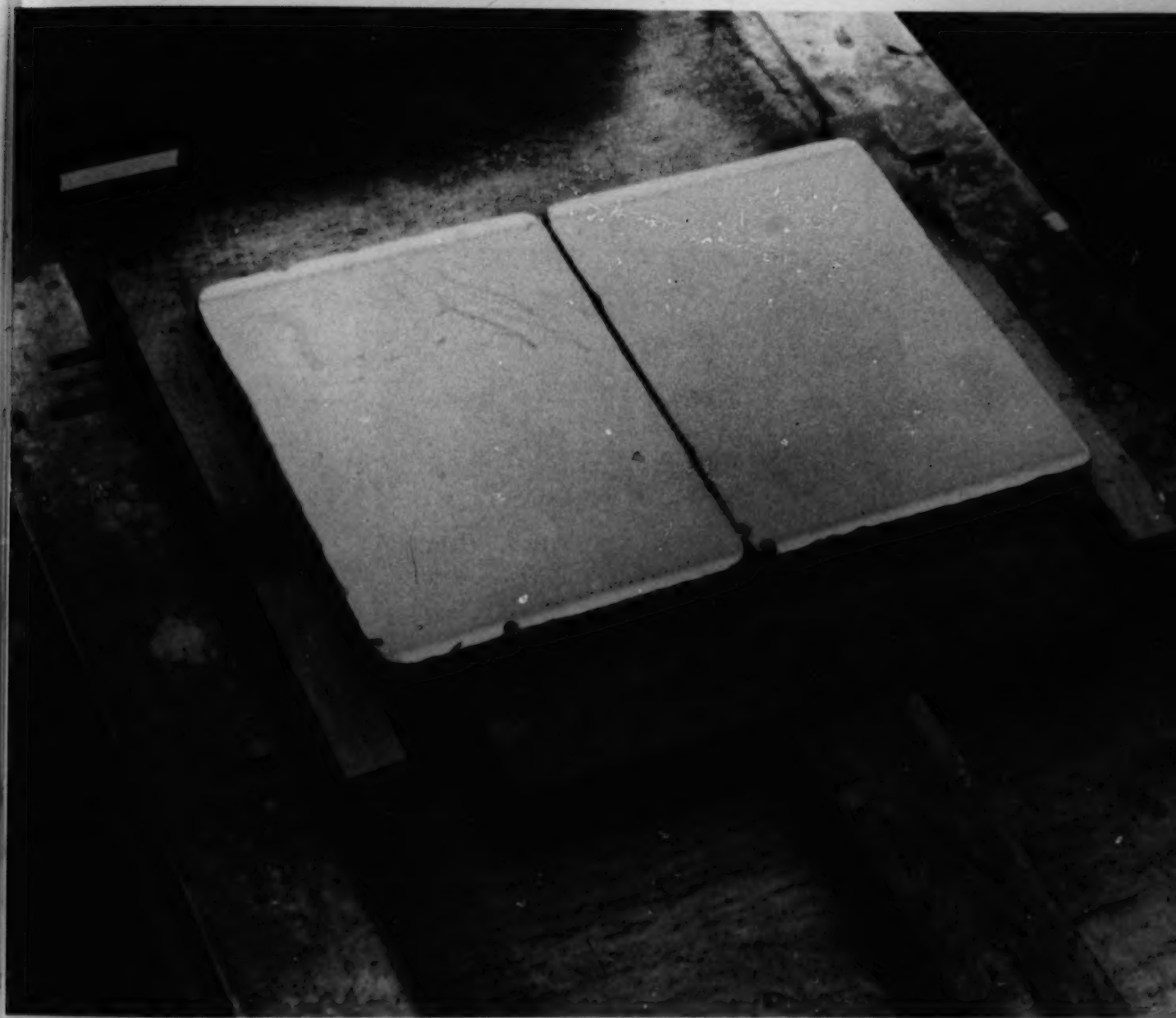


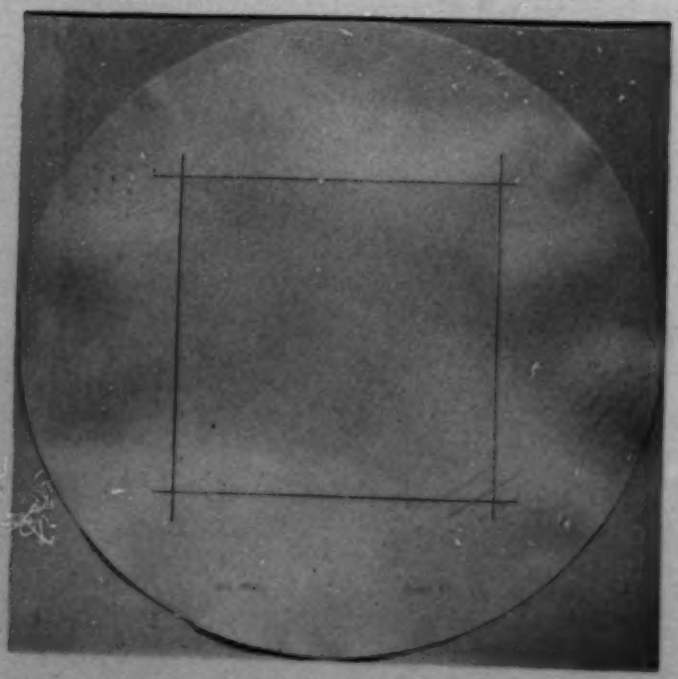
28 Koh-i-noor 7H-#1. 1966



29 *Venus 7H-81*. 1966

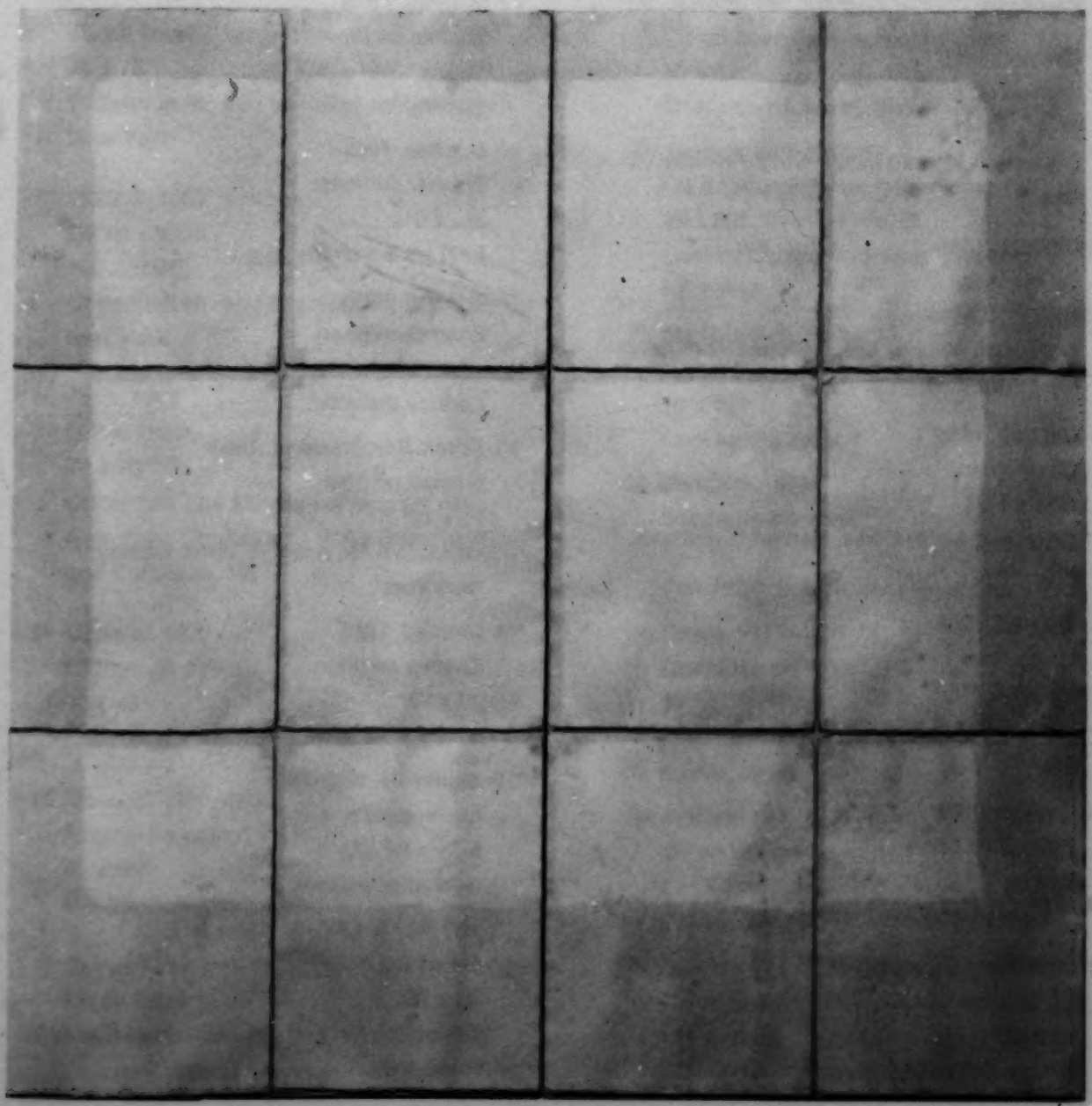
Lithography stones in press for 37 *Two Stones*.
Printed between March 1 and 3, 19[illegible]





38 *Circle Lithograph*. Printed between March 17 and June 25, 1971

Classico IV. 1988
Polymer on paper
91⅞ x 89⅛"
Collection Dr. and Mrs. Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, Milan
Not in exhibition.



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION
*Not illustrated

Paintings

1 *Untitled*. 1965
Enamel on linen
11¼ x 11¼"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

2 *Untitled*. 1965
Oil on linen
10⅛ x 10⅛"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

3 *Untitled*. 1965
Oil on linen
10¼ x 10¼"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

4 *Untitled*. 1965
Oil on linen
8⅞ x 8⅞"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

5 *Untitled*. 1965
Enamel on linen
63 x 63"
Collection Lucy R. Lippard, New York

*6 *Unfinished Painting*. 1965
Oil on linen
63 x 63"
Private Collection, Milan

7 *Untitled*. 1965
Enamel on linen
10¼ x 10¼"
Lent by the artist

8 *Untitled*. 1965
Enamel on linen
9¼ x 9¼"
Lent by the artist

*9 *Untitled*. 1965
Enamel on linen
10 x 10"
Lent by the artist

*10 *Dutch Boy Diamond*. 1965
Enamel on linen
10 x 10"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. John Wesley, New York

*11 *Untitled*. 1965
Enamel on linen
10 x 10"
Lent by the artist

*12 *Signet 20*. 1965-66
Oil on cotton
62½ x 62½"
Lent anonymously

13 *Windsor 6*. 1965-66
Oil on linen
76 x 76"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. William A. Camfield, Houston

14 *Mayco.* 1966
Oil on linen
76 x 76″
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

15 *Delta 2.* 1966
Oil on cotton
108 x 108″
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

16 *Twin.* 1966
Oil on linen
76 x 76″
Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Charles and Anita Blatt Fund and Purchase, 1971

17 *General.* 1970
Enamel on cotton
48 x 48″
Collection Heiner Friedrich, Cologne

18 *General.* 1970
Enamel on cotton
55 x 55″
Private Collection, Milan

19 *Surface Veil I.* 1970
Oil on linen
144 x 144″
Courtesy Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, Milan

*20 *Surface Veil.* 1970-71
Oil on fiberglass on featherboard
39 x 39″
Collection John W. Weber, New York

21 *Surface Veil.* 1970-71
Oil on fiberglass on featherboard
39 x 39″
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Marco Buitoni, New York

22 *Surface Veil.* 1970-71
Oil on fiberglass on featherboard
12 x 12″
Lent by the artist

*23 *Meridian.* 1971
Enamelac on linen
60 x 60″
Collection S. I. Newhouse, Jr., New York

*24 *Lenox.* 1971
Enamelac on linen
59 x 59″
Collection Dr. and Mrs. Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, Milan

25 *Surface Veil III.* 1971
Oil on cotton
144 x 144″
Collection John W. Weber, New York

*26 *Surface Veil IV.* 1971-72
Oil on cotton
144 x 144″
Collection John W. Weber, New York

Drawings

27 *Eagle Turquoise 7H-#4.* 1966
Graphite pencil
12⅜ x 12⅜"
Collection Ruth Vollmer, New York

28 *Koh-I-noor 7H-#1.* 1966
Graphite pencil
13 x 13"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

29 *Venus 7H-#1.* 1966
Graphite pencil
12¾ x 12¾"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

*30 *Castell 9H-#1.* 1966
Graphite pencil
13 x 13"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

*31 *Eagle Turquoise 6H-#2.* 1966
Graphite pencil
13 x 13"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach, New York

*32 *Watermark Drawing.* 1969
Graphite pencil
20 x 30"
Collection Heiner Friedrich, Cologne

*33 *Watermark Drawing.* 1969
Graphite pencil
20 x 30"
Collection Heiner Friedrich, Cologne

*34 *Watermark Drawing.* 1969
Graphite pencil
20 x 30"
Collection Heiner Friedrich, Cologne

*35 *Watermark Drawing.* 1969
Graphite pencil
20 x 30"
Collection Heiner Friedrich, Cologne

*36 *Watermark Drawing.* 1969
Graphite pencil
20 x 30"
Collection Heiner Friedrich, Cologne

Prints

37 *Two Stones.* Printed between March 1 and 3, 1971
4 lithographs: 3 trial proofs; 1 cancellation proof
29¾ x 29¾" each
Lent by the artist

38 *Circle Lithograph.* Printed between March 17 and June 25, 1971
20 lithographs: 18 trial proofs; 1 cancellation proof; number 1 of edition
20⅛" diameter each
Lent by the artist

BIOGRAPHY

1930	Born in Nashville, Tennessee
1948-49	Studied Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, Cookville
1949-50	Studied Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville
1950-52	United States Army
1952	Moved to New York City where he still lives
1967	First one-man exhibition at Bianchini Gallery, New York

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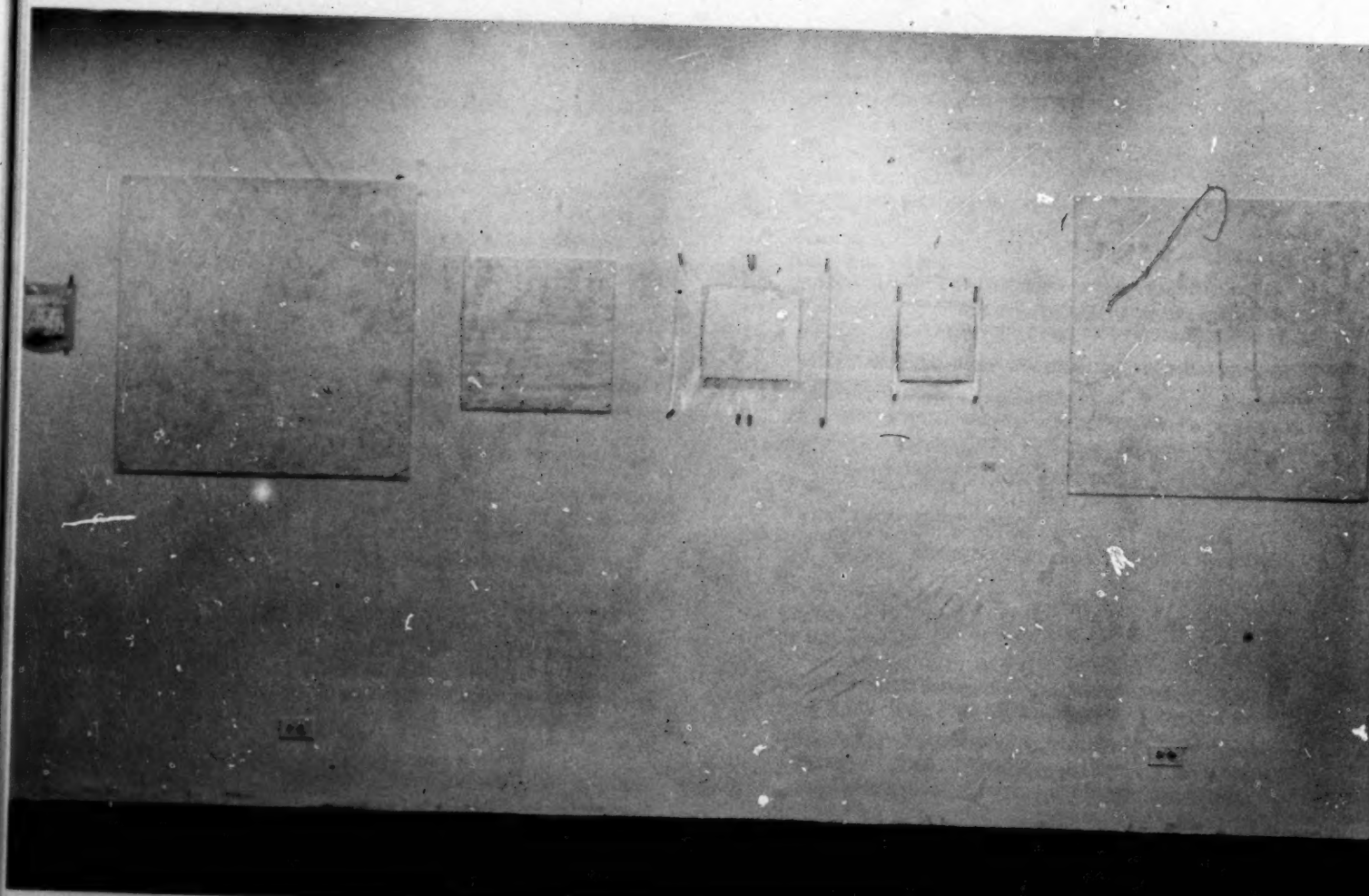

Installation view, Dwan Gallery, New York
February/March 1971

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